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THE EXPULSION OF THE CHEROKEES FROM EAST
TEXAS.

JOHN H. REAGAN.

In the first half of the year 1839 the Cherokee Indians occupied that part of Texas which is bounded on the east by the Angelina river, on the west by the Neches river, on the south by the old San Antonio road, and on the north by the Sabine river. What is now Cherokee and Smith counties covers substantially the same territory. At that time, the Shawnee Indians occupied what is now Rusk county, their principal village being near where the town of Henderson is now situated. The Delaware Indians then lived in the eastern part of what is now Henderson county. Less than two years before that time, the Kickapoo Indians lived in the northeastern part of what is now Anderson county; and in a hotly contested battle between them and their Mexican allies and the Texans, they were defeated and driven from that part of the county. The whites charged the Cherokees with stealing their horses and with an occasional murder of white people. This their Chief Bowles denied; and alleged that the thefts and murders were committed by wild Indians, who came through his country. But in 1838 the Cherokees murdered the families of the Killoughs and Wilhouses, several in number, and broke up the settlement of whites in the vicinity of Neches Saline, now the northwest part of Cherokee county. There was no question about these murders being committed by the Cherokees, and that Dog Shoot, one of their head men, led in this massacre. Complaints of thefts and murders by the Cherokees became so numerous, and were so authenticated, as to cause the President of the Republic, General M. B. Lamar, to send a communication to Chief Bowles, through the Indian agent, Martin Lacy, Esq., making certain recitals evidencing hostility to the white people. Among the facts so recited, as I remember them, one was that in the year 1836, when the people of Texas were retreating from their homes before the advancing army of the Mexican general, Santa Anna, that he, Chief Bowles, assembled his warriors on the San Antonio road, east of the Neches, for the purpose

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of attacking the Texans if they should be defeated by Santa Anna. Another was that, in the preceding January, 1839, General Burleson had captured some Cherokees on the upper Colorado, on their return from the City of Mexico, accompanied by some Mexicans, and bearing a commission to Chief Bowles as a colonel in the Mexican army, and a quantity of powder and lead, and instructions for his co-operation with the Mexican army, which was to invade Texas during the then coming spring. And also calling attention to the murders and thefts which had been committed on the people of Texas by the Cherokees; and upon these statements, saying to Chief Bowles that Texas could not permit such an enemy to live in the heart of the country, and that he must take his tribe to the nation north of Red river.

President Lamar in that communication said to Chief Bowles that he had appointed six among the most respectable citizens of the Republic, and authorized them to value the unmovable property of the Cherokees, which was understood to be their improvements on the land, but not the land, and to pay them for these in money. I knew some of these men at the time as most worthy citizens. One of them was Judge Noble, of Nacogdoches county. The President also said to them that they could take all their movable property with them and go in peace. But that go they must; peaceably if they would, but forcibly if they must.

It is proper for me to say that I have seen, in the State Department, a paper purporting to be a communication from President Lamar to Chief Bowles, supposed to be the one announcing his views as to the necessity of the removal of this tribe. Dr. W. G. W. Jowers and myself, and one Cordra, a half-breed, accompanied Mr. Lacy, the Indian agent, when he took the President's communication to Bowles. Cordra went along as interpreter, as Bowles could not speak English and the agent could not speak the Cherokee language. Dr. Jowers was afterwards a member of the House of Representatives and of the Senate of Texas several terms. The paper then read and interpreted to Chief Bowles contained, in substance, what I have said, and is very different from the paper in the office of the Secretary of State. Indian Agent Lacy lived on the San Antonio road about six miles east of the Neches river. Chief Bowles lived about three miles north of Mr. Lacy.

When we reached the residence of Bowles, he invited us to a

spring a few rods from his house, and, seated on a log, received the communication of the President. After it was read and interpreted, he remained silent for a time, and then made a denial of the charges contained in that communication, and said the wild Indians had done the killing and stealing, and not his people.

He then entered into a defense of the title of his tribe to the country which they occupied, as I have described it. He said that after his band separated from the old Cherokee nation, they, under him as their chief, settled at Lost Prairie, north of Red river, now in Arkansas; that after living there for a time, they moved to the Three Forks of the Trinity river, now Dallas and the surrounding counties; that he had intended to hold that country for his tribe, but that the other Indians disputed his right to do so, and claimed it as a common hunting ground; that he remained there with his tribe about three years, in a state of continual war with the other Indians, until about one-third of his warriors had been killed; that he then moved down near the Spanish Fort of Nacogdoches (I use his expression); and that the local authorities permitted him to occupy the country which his tribe then occupied; that he then went to the City of Mexico, and got the authority of the Mexican government to occupy that country, and that during the Revolution of 1835-36 the Consultation representing Texas recognized his right to that country by a treaty.

It is proper here to state that the Consultation did appoint General Houston and Colonel Forbes, and authorized them to make a treaty with the Cherokees. I am not informed as to the extent of the powers conferred on them for that purpose. A treaty was agreed to between them and the Cherokees, and reported to the Consultation, which adjourned without ratifying the treaty so made; and it, with its powers, was superseded by the Convention, which formed the Constitution of the Republic; and that Convention rejected the treaty which had been agreed to by General Houston and Colonel Forbes. That is the treaty to which Chief Bowles referred. So that the Cherokees had no higher title to the country they then occupied than the privilege of occupancy during the pleasure of the sovereign of the soil.

After his statement as to the right of his tribe to that country, Chief Bowles stated to Mr. Lacy that he had been in correspondence with John Ross, the chief of the original tribe of Cherokees,

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for a long time, looking to an agreement between them to unite the two tribes and go to California, and take possession of a country out of the reach of the white people. It will be remembered that this was about ten years before the cession of California by Mexico to the United States, and when but little was known of that country by our people. And he offered to produce and have read to Mr. Lacy a bundle of letters on this subject, which he said was as large as his thigh. Mr. Lacy waived the necessity of their production, saying that the statement of Chief Bowles was sufficient on this subject. Chief Bowles then said that he could not make answer to the communication of the President without consulting his chiefs and head men, and requested time to convene his council. Thereupon it was agreed between them to have another meeting a week or ten days later (I do not remember the exact length of time), to give time for the council of the Cherokees to meet and act.

On the day appointed, Agent Lacy returned to the residence of Chief Bowles, accompanied by Cordra, the interpreter, and by Dr. Jowers and myself. We were again invited to the spring, as upon our first visit. The grave deportment of Chief Bowles indicated that he felt the seriousness of his position. He told Mr. Lacy that there had been a meeting of the chiefs and head men in council; that his young men were for war; that all who were in the council were for war, except himself and Big Mush; that his young men believed they could whip the whites; that he knew the whites could ultimately whip them, but that it would cost them ten years of bloody frontier war. He inquired of Mr. Lacy if action on the President's demand could not be postponed until his people could make and gather their crops. Mr. Lacy informed him that he had no authority or discretion beyond what was said in the communication from the President. The language of Chief Bowles indicated that he regarded this as settling the question, and that war must ensue. He said to Mr. Lacy that he was an old man (being then eighty-three years of age, but looking vigorous and strong), and that in the course of nature he could not live much longer, and that as to him it mattered but little. But he added that he felt much solicitude for his wives (he had three) and for his children; that if he fought, the whites would kill him; and if he refused to fight, his own people would kill him. He said he had led his peo-

ple a long time, and that he felt it to be his duty to stand by them, whatever fate might befall him.

I was strongly impressed by the manly bearing and frankness and candor of the agent and the chief. Neither could read or write, except that Mr. Lacy could mechanically sign his name. And during their two conferences they exhibited a dignity of bearing which could hardly have been exceeded by the most enlightened diplomats. There was no attempt to deceive or mislead made by either of them.

The whites on the one side and the Indians on the other at once commenced preparations for the conflict. Chief Bowles took his position east of the Neches river, in the northwest corner of what is now Cherokee county, concentrating his warriors and collecting his families there. He was joined by the Shawnees, the Delawares, and by warriors from all the wild tribes of Indians, and there were at that time a good many of them. Colonel Rusk, with a regiment of volunteers, was first in the field on the side of the Texans. Vice-President Burnet, then Acting President of the Republic (President Lamar, with the leave of Congress, was temporarily absent from the Republic), General Albert Sidney Johnston, the Secretary of War, and Adjutant-General Hugh McLeod, accompanied this regiment. It went into camp about six miles to the east of Bowles' camp, and for ten days or more negotiations were carried on between the belligerents, Bowles negotiating to gain time to collect the warriors from the wild tribes, and the Texans negotiating to gain time for the arrival of Colonel Burleson's regiment of regulars from the west, and Colonel Landrum's regiment of volunteers from the red lands.

During this time an incident occurred which might have been of a very serious character. A neutral boundary had been agreed on between the belligerents, and the men of neither side were to pass it without notice. Acting President Burnet, the Secretary of War, Adjutant-General McLeod, Colonel Rusk, and a few others, had gone to the camp of the Indians, under a flag of truce, to conduct negotiations, as they had done on previous days. Colonel Jim Carter and a few others, acting as scouts, found John Bowles, a son of the chief, and a few other Indians, who had passed the neutral boundary, and gave chase for them. The Indians escaped, and when they reached their camps reported that they had been run in

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by the Texans. This caused violent excitement among the Indians, and the gentlemen named reported that it seemed for a time that they were to be attacked by the Indians, in which event their massacre would have been inevitable. But explanations were made, which allayed the excitement. At the subsequent meetings for negotiation, the Texas officials took with them an escort of thirty picked men. An agreement was made that neither party was to break up camp or make any move without giving notice to the other party. On the 13th or 14th of July, Colonel Burleson's regiment of regulars, and Colonel Landrum's regiment of volunteers, reached the camp of the Texas forces. And early on the morning of the 15th Chief Bowles sent his son, John Bowles, accompanied by Fox Fields, under a flag of truce, to notify the Texans that he would break up camp that morning and move to the west of the Neches river. On reaching headquarters under a flag of truce, they delivered their message to General Johnston, and having done so, inquired if they could return in safety. They both spoke English very well. General Johnston told the messenger that his father had acted honorably in giving the notice according to agreement, and that he would see that they had safe conduct out of our camp; and he detailed a number of men, with orders to see them safely a half-mile beyond our line of pickets. He also told them to inform Chief Bowles that the Texas forces would break up camp that morning and pursue him.

On the assembling of this little army of three regiments, the volunteers wanted Colonel Rusk for their commander, while the regulars preferred Colonel Burleson for that position. These two patriots and heroes of the Revolution, which made Texas a Republic, did not desire to antagonize each other, and either of them was willing that the other should command. But it was agreed to solve the question by having General Kelsey H. Douglass elected as brigadier-general and placed in the chief command. And when this army broke up its camp on the morning of the 15th of July, 1839, to pursue the Indians, Colonel Landrum was ordered to move up on the east side of the Neches river, and be in position to intercept the Indians if they should turn northward, as it was expected they would. The regiments of Colonel Rusk and Colonel Burleson moved to the west, passing through the camp which had

been occupied by the Indians, and crossing the Neches on their trail.

Chief Bowles had taken position on a creek some six miles west of the Neches with a part of his warriors, and had sent the families with the balance of the warriors to a position about six miles north of where he made this stand. His men occupied the bed of a creek, which, running from north to south, made a sudden bend to the east, and his position was immediately above this bend.

After the Texans crossed the Neches, scouts were thrown forward, with directions if they found the Indians in position to give battle, to keep up a desultory firing at long range, without exposing themselves too much, so as to give notice of the position of the Indians. As the command advanced, and when the firing of the scouts was heard, Colonel Rusk's regiment was ordered to advance on the north side of the creek they were on, and Colonel Burleson's regiment was ordered to cross the creek and advance on the south side of the creek, so as to put the Indians between these regiments. When the troops reached the bend of the creek, which was the extreme right of the line occupied by the Indians, Rusk's regiment wheeled to the right and formed in front of the Indians, while Burleson's regiment turned to the right and passed up into the rear of the Indians. This was an hour or two before sundown. A battle ensued, which, however, did not last long. Dr. Rogers and Colonel Crain were killed, and some six or eight Texans were wounded; and it was reported that the Indians left eighteen dead on the field, and the remainder of them were routed and joined the others some six miles to the north, near the Neches, and just north of the Delaware village. The Texans camped for the night near the battlefield. And fearing that the Indians might break up into small bands and attack the more exposed frontier settlements, a number of squads were detached from the command and ordered to proceed to the exposed parts of the frontier to defend the families of the whites.

On the morning of the 16th of July, the Texans, thus reduced in number, took up the line of march in pursuit of the Indians, and found them, soon after passing the Delaware village, in a very strong position. They occupied a long ravine, deep enough to protect them, with gently sloping open woods in front of them. Our line of battle was formed on a low ridge in front of them, and skir-

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mishers thrown forward, who were at once engaged with the skirmish line of the Indians. Every sixth man of our command was detailed to hold and guard our hourses. This, with the details sent away the night before, had considerably reduced our fighting force, and we were confronted by the entire force of the Indians, which, from the information we afterwards received, considerably outnumbered the Texans who participated in the battle.

The scene at that time made a very vivid impression on my young mind. The Delaware village, in our immediate rear, was wrapped in flames, and the black columns of smoke were floating over us; the skirmishers were fighting in front of us, and our line of battle advancing to the conflict.

The battle lasted about two hours. We had six men killed and thirty-six wounded. The Indian loss was very much greater. During this engagement, Chief Bowles was a very conspicuous figure. He was mounted on what we call a paint horse, and had on him a sword and sash, and military hat and silk vest, which had been given to him by General Houston. And thus conspicuously mounted and dressed, he rode up and down in the rear of his line, very much exposed during the entire battle. Our officers two or three times ordered the men to advance nearer the line of the Indians, and then would order them to fall back, in the hope that in this way the Indians might be drawn from their strong position. And just as this was done the last time, word ran along our line that the Indians were in our rear getting our horses. This came near producing a panic. Colonel Len Williams and Ben A. Vansickle, who were with us, and who understood and could speak the Cherokee language, told us that at that time they could hear Bowles, who was urging his warriors to charge, and telling them that the whites were whipped if they would charge.

When at last the Indians retreated, Chief Bowles was the last one to attempt to leave the battlefield. His horse had been wounded many times, and he shot through the thigh. His horse was disabled and could go no further, and he dismounted and started to walk off. He was shot in the back by Henry Conner, afterwards Major Connor; walked forward a little and fell, and then rose to a sitting position facing us, and immediately in front of the company to which I belonged. I had witnessed his dignity and manliness in council, his devotion to his tribe in sustaining their decision for

war against his judgment, and his courage in battle, and, wishing to save his life, ran towards him, and, as I approached him from one direction, my captain, Robert Smith, approached him from another, with his pistol drawn. As we got to him, I said, "Captain, don't shoot him," but as I spoke he fired, shooting the chief in the head, which caused instant death. It ought to be said for Captain Smith that he had known of the many murders and thefts by the Indians, and possibly did, in the heat of battle, what, under other circumstances, he would not have done, for he was esteemed as a most worthy man and citizen.

The families of the Indians were camped in the Neches bottom, in thick woods. After the battle, our command camped at the edge of the bottom very near the Indians, but made no attack on them. That night we could hear the hum and bustle of their camp—the greater part of the night, and the next morning they were gone in the direction of the Grand Saline, in what is now Van Zandt county; and while our troops followed them to the Grand Saline, they did not overtake them.

Colonel Landrum, it was said, was misled by his guide and did not reach the balance of the command until after the battles. The Indians dispersed, some going to the cross timbers, some to the north of Red river, and some to Mexico. A year or more later—I do not remember the precise date—the wives and some of the children of Chief Bowles came to the Rio Grande at Laredo, and asked permission to pass through Texas on the way to the Cherokees north of Red river, and President Lamar granted their request, furnished them an escort, and transportation and rations, on their way through Texas. I saw them on the San Antonio road east of the Neches.

Whatever apology may be necessary for the imperfections of this paper may be found in the fact that it has been very hurriedly prepared, under a constant pressure of very exacting official duties, without time for careful revision.

In order to avoid egotism, I omit the mention of a number of incidents, which might be of interest as personal reminiscences.